

Statement and Resolution on the Appropriate Use of SBAC Standardized Tests and School Accountability

Draft: Tuesday, March 17, 2015

This spring, students across the state will take the new SBAC standardized tests. These assessments focus on English Language Arts and Mathematics and were developed to measure student mastery of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which are part of a larger set of Vermont standards. The comprehensive set addresses what we want our students to know and to be able to do to thrive beyond school, whether in college, civic life or careers.

Since the adoption of the CCSS standards in 2010, the state has provided extensive professional development to educators. Furthermore, local districts and teachers have invested substantial resources and efforts to support the development and use of curriculum that is aligned with the Common Core. Yet, the SBAC tests create implementation challenges for both schools and students:

- The new tests involve performance tasks that assess students' ability to problem solve in an applied context. This is an improvement, yet it is a substantial change from earlier approaches to assessment. This means that SBAC scores cannot be compared with the earlier NECAP scores. They represent a new direction.
- The SBAC tests are administered via computer. This approach holds strong promise for individualizing testing, adapting for individual student disabilities, and testing knowledge in applied settings. However, this format is untested in broad scale application.
- All schools have had to make sure they have enough computer capacity and sufficient internet access for all students to take the tests within the prescribed time frame. The schools in the state are to be commended for their extensive preparations and investments. However, we should not confuse this significant effort with equitable access to advanced technology across the state.
- Districts that have more access and whose students have more familiarity with technology will find it easier to administer these tests. This raises the question as to how much the tests measure reading and mathematics skills, and how much they measure computer access and literacy.
- The new tests purport to measure progress towards "college and career readiness." While test designers have enlisted numerous professional judgment committees to aggregate opinions as to what this means, the tests have not been externally validated as measuring these important attributes.

We expect that, over time, the new computer adaptive tests will be better than their predecessors. As one student noted after taking the field test last spring, the new test is different “because on this one you actually have to think.” However, the use of such tests will not be without challenges that are unrelated to how well teachers are teaching and how much our students have learned.

The State Board believes standardized tests play an important but limited public assurance role in education. Well-designed tests can help us evaluate our progress towards greater equity of outcomes for our students. Educators can use tests to set realistic targets for improvement. We can use test scores as one trigger for more detailed evaluation of schools and supervisory units to learn what schools might be doing very effectively or to help identify strategies schools can use to get better.

The State Board also realizes the real limitations of what we can conclude about learning based on test scores, particularly in the first few years of implementation of a new test and new standards. Our students are being tested as if they had access to Common Core-aligned curricula for their entire educational career.

We must also view the testing program in the broader context of Vermont education. In addition to the CCSS, the Vermont State Board of Education also adopted the Next Generation Science Standards in June of 2013 and the Education Quality Standards in December of 2013. Concurrently, the Vermont State Legislature passed Act 77 that created flexible pathways with the new requirement for Personalized Learning Plans for all students in seventh grade and above. And, the entire state educational system is working to implement Act 166, which provides universal access to PreKindergarten. These are great and worthy initiatives. Yet the State Board is keenly aware that districts across the state have been experiencing increasing fiscal stress and declining enrollments, which in turn have opened difficult conversations about consolidation.

Consequently, the Vermont State Board of Education proclaims;

WHEREAS, schools in the state of Vermont are still transitioning to the new Common Core Standards, a progression of various skills to be developed throughout an educational career, and this transition is not yet complete; and

WHEREAS, This test administration is the first time educators in the State of Vermont have been asked to administer a test using a computerized delivery system which is yet to be proven and the first time many students have experienced this testing format; and

WHEREAS, the Vermont State Board of Education has already expressed in detail their views on the proper role of Standardized Testing on the Resolution on Assessment and Accountability on August 26, 2014; and

WHEREAS, the appropriate and future use of these tests as required in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act is uncertain, which greatly influences both policy and expenditure decisions for states, and

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WHEREAS, numerous states have expressed similar reservations and the California Board of Education suspended the state's school accountability system on March 11, 2015 for one year to give teachers and students time to adjust to new standardized tests aligned with Common Core standards;

Therefore be it –

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education will not use SBAC scores for the 2014-15 year for the purpose of annual school evaluation determinations; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board believes that until students' elementary through high school education has been guided by the new standards and schools have had practice with administering the SBAC test and interpreting SBAC results, the results of the SBAC assessment will not support reliable and valid inferences about student performance, and thus should not be used as the basis for any consequential purpose; and

RESOLVED that until empirical studies confirm a sound relationship between performance on the SBAC and critical and valued life outcomes ("college and career-ready"), test results should not be used to make normative and consequential judgments about schools and students; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education finds it inappropriate to use the results of this assessment, a pilot test, for any form of accountability that could misidentify and/or mislabel schools and divert attention from the more comprehensive Vermont Education Quality Review and any findings that might come out of that review; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education supports the Secretary of Education's efforts to fully implement the Education Quality Standards, through an Education Quality Review process; an assessment that will reflect the values of Vermont and will give a more holistic view of the status of Vermont Schools than the SBAC assessments; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education calls on Vermont state legislators to sufficiently fund the Agency of Education to provide the resources and capacity needed to implement the Education Quality Review Process; and

RESOLVED, that the Vermont State Board of Education again calls on the United States Congress and Administration to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as the "No Child Left Behind Act") to reduce testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality, eschew the use of student test scores in evaluating educators, and allow flexibility that reflects the unique circumstances of all states.